Imagination and the ethics of religious narratives

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> A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at, for it lout the one country at which Humanity is always landing. And when Humanity lands there, it looks out, and, seeing a better country, sets sail. Progress is the realization of Utopias (Oscar Wilde, 1854-199)

It is said that utopias exist in our imagination as better futures. Human beings become who they are and develop their view of the world through the interplay of will, imagination and reason. The vast literature on imagination shows that the word often provokes conflicting or contradictory assumptions and traditions within the philosophy of mind, aesthetics, psychology, literature, theology. Furthermore, human will and imagination have often been closely associated. According to Claes Ryn's theory of imagination, our will is `the generic, categorical name for that infinity and variety of impulse that orients the individual to particular tasks.' Our will informs our character and behaviour but the direction which our will takes is informed by imagination. It is the imagination which both shapes and is shaped by will/desire.[1] It is most fundamentally through imagination that an individual or group of people hold an intuitive sense of what is real, right, wrong, good, true and beautiful. In the end, it is our imagination which gives us the sense of possibilities.

The Islamic story of Adam and Eve in which Adam's transgression means his destiny on earth is fully sealed, has been interpreted as a story of disobedience but also human desire to know, to give into a the imaginative impulse. Banished from paradise Adam must now experience distance from God to understand what nearness was and while this might lie at the root of human struggle, it is also a route to human development. In fact, some Muslim thinkers saw a positive ray in the first human act of disobedience. The Indian philosopher poet Muḥammad Iqbāl. Iqbāl saw the creation of man as the creation of a being who, driven by desire and passion

[1] Claes G. Ryn, 'Will, Imagination and Reason: Irving Babbit and the Problem of Reality,' Originally published in 1986. (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1997). 147. See Joshua James Bowman,'s Phd Thesis, Arcadian Exile: The Imaginative Tension in Henry David Thoreau's Political Thought, 2016, 27-28.

would tear away all veils:

> Desire, resting in the lap of life
> And forgetful of itself,
> Opened its eyes, and a new world was born.
> Life said, `Through all my years
> I lay in the dust and convulsed
> Until at last a door appeared
> In this ancient dome.'2

For Iqbāl, Adam's transgression was not a loss and `not an act of moral depravity: it is man's transition from simple consciousness to the first flash of self-consciousness, a kind of waking from the dream of nature.'3

For many philosophers and political theorists, imagination and hope for a better world inspires and drives many not only for happiness in the present but enterprise for change in the future. Imagination is about seeing and understanding the world and this is inherently a moral activity. It is through observation that we become aware of human freedom to think and act, of our relational existence, of a moral impulse to make things better. Without effort and change, things do not improve and as Bertrand Russell wrote `It is not a finished Utopia that we ought to desire, but a world where imagination and hope are alive and active.'[4]

The power of the imagination lies in its potential to persuade and provoke. Herein lies its ambivalence so that there is arguably both good imagination and bad imagination, and it matters what we commit ourselves to imagining. It is not simply about the means but also the ends, not just about making things happen but what is worth pursuing to begin with. Thus, imagination is bound up with ethical consciousness.

For those with a religious faith, religion can hold several competing claims on our lives. For some it is truth, history and fact told in multiple narratives, through multiple voices. Religion

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[2] Muḥammad Iqbāl, *Tulip in the Desert, A Selection of Poetry* , translated by Mustansir Mir, Hurst &Company Publishers, London, 2000, 26.
[3] Muḥammad Iqbāl, *The Reconstruction of Religious Thought in Islam*, Ashraf Press, Lahore, 85.
[4] Bertrand Russell, *Political Ideals*, The Century Co., New York, 1917, 23.

is God and goodness, poetry and prophecy told and retold in worship, stories and artistic renditions over the centuries. For others, despite the imaginative impulse behind all religion, religious faith has been confined largely to doctrines and dogmas, rituals and practices many of which struggle to remain meaningful in peoples' lives today. Yet in our increasingly pluralist societies, faith in God should be a vessel for a shared imagination. This requires thinking beyond our personal struggle of achieving a good and happy life, thinking beyond our personal salvation. Rather it should be seen as a collective struggle where we retain a reverence for the desires and truths of others alongside our own hopes. Thus, the transcendent and the human social are intertwined. Yet to some extent it seems that imagination has lost its place in our daily life – we have lost the art of thinking, speaking and doing imaginatively in our political and moral discourse – imagination should be central, the very ethic which allows us to think of different worlds, different justices, different kinds of knowledge.

A central question for scholars of religion, is how we should restore to the humanities and the social sciences a sense of transcendent moral purpose. Why should any artistic quest or interest including writing be about transformation of the self and society? For most, any pursuit of the arts especially literature engages our inner life, the inner life where most of us live our lives. All narrative is a kind of storytelling, what we choose to think about and the spaces which we create to invite others in. Literature like most arts elevates society above its purely practical needs. It gives value to human existence, it ponders on the desires and restlessness which make us fully human. Literature like so many art forms throws light on the emotions we cannot explain or understand, the metaphors of our existence, which add colour and life to our everyday flat world language of numbers, efficiency and performance.

James Smith describes this as the `ultimate love' that which we pledge allegiance to, that which we worship, and states that `its not what I think that shapes my life from the bottom up; it what I desire, what I love, that animates my passion.' For human beings, things matter because in ways that we can't often articulate:

> There is a sort of drive that pushes (or pulls) us to act in certain ways, develop certain relationships, pursue certain goods, make certain sacrifices, enjoy certain things. And at the end of the day, if asked why we do this, ultimately we run up against the limits of articulation even though we `know' why we do it: its because of what we love.'[5]

[5] James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom*, Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2009,51-52.

For Smith, the *telos* to which our love is aimed is not a `list of ideas and propositions or doctrines, disembodied concepts of values.' Rather, it is an imagined and aesthetic picture communicated through stories and plays, novels and films. It is our imagination that is captivated by what forms the good life, the life of human flourishing and it is our teleological love which orients us to particular ways of envisioning the good life.[6] It is argued that an appeal to the imagination also supports tolerance, because an imaginative claim is less confrontational than an analytical claim. When a religion presents its claims in a narrative (poetic) and visual (aesthetic) form, it leaves the audience more room for interpretation and greater freedom to absorb the information at its own pace. Appeals to the imagination come across as less imposing and therefore engender a more tolerant environment. [7]

And all narrative, the written and the spoken word shapes our attitude to one another; thus we cannot escape the moral and intellectual impulse behind so much of what we say or do. This commitment to expression should not be thought of in the simplistic and binary terms of religious and the secular as these make for false distinctions when we reflect on civilizational progress. The English historian Arnold Toynbee believed that civilizations are always confronted with challenges and that societies either flourish flounder and ultimately fall based on whether a creative minority crafts the right responses to those challenges. Many Muslim scholars decry the gradual decline of philosophy and metaphysics in the Islamic world both of which ask how is it that we perceive the world. They argue that Muslims no longer do abstraction rather reduce all faith to conformity and conviction. Ethics is impoverished when metaphysics is ignored.

Yet, for many religious faith rings hollow and disenchantment permeates peoples' lives. In the 1970s, Christopher Lasch spoke of our changing sensibilities and argued that in the 1960s `radical politics filled empty lives, provided a sense of meaning and purpose. But today he states:

> The contemporary climate is therapeutic, not religious. People today hunger not for personal salvation, let alone for the restoration of an earlier golden age, but for the

[6] Smith, *Desiring*, 53.
[7] See Andrew V. Abela,` Appealing to the imagination: Effective and ethical marketing of religion, *Journal of Business Research*,' 67:2,50-58, 54.

feeling, the momentary illusion, of personal wellbeing, health, and psychic security.[8]

It seems that as a society we struggle to talk of spiritual matters of our internal world, even as we realise that the material life, the life of the here and now, is never completely fulfilling. The truth is that our real learning takes place when we are confronted and challenged by the stuff that is not material, that is not about goals and targets, that cannot be measured, packaged or commodified, that is unsettling and this is what really gives shape and discernment to our lives as individuals and to the moral judgements we make as a society. In our metaphysical age philosophy no longer pretends to have answers to questions regarding the personal or even the collective, conduct of life. Philosophy especially in its classical form was focused on teaching the good life the just society, but today the role of philosophers is disputed. Theodore Adorno lamented in his famous *Minima Moralia* that contemporary philosophers were too occupied with the minutiae of method and that in place of robust doctrines about the good life, philosophy has become the melancholy science allowing at best only scattered aphoristic reflections from damaged life.[9]

And yet while philosophical thinking on what makes for the good life, for human flourishing and for good human relations are still appealing, Claes Ryn writes that appeals to the imagination is an ethic in itself, such appeals are poetic—they convey information intuitively rather than analytically. Poetic information adds to the general intuitive grasp of life that human beings hold: Human beings did not have to wait for philosophers to know something substantial about their own existence. They always had an immediate intuition of the nature of the whole, an awareness to which story-tellers, poets, and other artists contributed. Thus our moral visions for life are most compelling when they say something about how all of us relate to one another in the here and now. The subtext for moral sources cannot always be theism when we live in an increasingly secular society. But imagination at its best brings all aspects of life, desires, faith character into an intricate whole showing us the strength and complexity of human interconnectedness. For educationalists like the American Irving Babbit, the true purpose of education was to assimilate the wisdom of the ages through the right use of the human imagination: art was essential to creating community:

[8]Christopher Lasch, *The Culture of Narcissism,*New York: W.W.Norton & Inc, 1991, 7.
[9] See Robert Louden `Meaningful but Immoral Lives,' in Beatrix Himmelman (ed.), On meaning in Life, Walter de Gruyter, Inc,: Berlin, 2013, 23.

> What creates community—what advances civilization and the happiness of the human person—is that which takes the individual away from his impulsive, natural, self-conceit and offers a larger reality revealed through the lessons of the ages. These lessons, exemplified in great works of literature and history, communicate the larger world and stimulate the moral imagination of the student with reference to a shared, humane center.[10]

Whenever we write, we are saying something about our world so the question is with what eyes should we see the world? In his 2010 book, *The Christian Imagination*, the Yale theologian Willie Jennings pays tribute in his acknowledgment to his parents who he writes, `taught me to see the world with Christian eyes.' As a writer, I contend that all vision is not about seeing the world but a certain way of reflecting on the world which uses story, metaphor and thought and action.

> The concepts that govern our thoughts are not just matters of the intellect. They also govern our everyday functioning. our concepts structure what we perceive, how we get around in the world, and how we relate to other people.[11]

Stories have great significance to human life because people create stories to understand the world around them and as many cultural theorists have concluded, human thought has the structural form of a narrative. For Jennings who writes as a black theologian and who lives in and outside a particular story, ` Christianity in the western world lives and moves within a diseased social imagination.' For Jennings, the history of Christian theological imagination was woven into `processes of colonial dominance.' As he writes:

> Indeed it is as though Christianity, wherever it went in the modern colonies, inverted its sense of hospitality. It claimed to be the host, the owner of the spaces it entered, and demanded native peoples enter its cultural logics, its way of being in the world and its conceptualities.'[12]

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[10] Glenn Davis, *Moral Imagination and Progressive Education*, http://www.theimaginativeconservative.org/2010/08/irving-babbitt-moral-imagination-and.html

[11] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By*, The University of Chicago Press, 1980, 3.

[12] Willie James Jennings, *The Christian Imagination*, Yale University Press, 2010, 8.

The underlying question for Jennings is why has Christianity which claims to be a religion based on brotherly love, failed to heal all kinds of social and racial divisions, in fact it came to be defined with these very divisions; the social imaginary of which he speaks is the lived realities of peoples lives. If we then go to the Islamic world, we can see a similar issue, that Muslims who continually defend Islam is a religion of peace, have to contend with the historical conflicts and current wars, both political and sectarian which continue to plague large parts of the Muslim world. The defense that this is not the real Islam just like the Christianity which propped up racial division etc is not the real Christianity wears thin when we see that neither narrative is reflected in the complex religiosity of both communities of people. The post colonial lens makes for a complex understanding of histories and while it is morally wrong to essentialise religions and civilisations, it is important to work with a few realities and perspectives which continue to challenge us about the narratives we read, believe and then pass down. This is all against a particular angst of the modern age where postmodernism itself is based on the internal distrust of meta narratives of society and knowledge.

Our discourse around religion takes place largely through a Eurocentric prism. It is not only a postcolonial world, it is a world where for some history seems to be irrelevant. We live in a new world of speed and progress where history neither needs to be remembered nor honoured. In his thoughtful epilogue to *Lost History*, Michael Morgan contemplates the `what ifs' of history:

> History might have taken another course. At that moment of rare equipoise between China, India and the Muslim world, and Europe in the late 15th and 16th centuries, any one of Europe's rivals could have made the same fateful decisions that Spain, Portugal and England undertook to support voyages of exploration and conquest. The Chines could have easily sailed the Pacific and the Ottoman Turks might have controlled the Atlantic.

But the Muslims did not lead the Age of Discovery and Imperialism; the Christian Europeans undertook this chapter in history. And so, the past continues to divide the present. As Morgan says, many others are not seduced by the power of the present, the `past for them remains a source of anger, resentment, vendetta. They will not rest until they correct the real or imagined

crimes of the past.'[13]

Religion and politics have never been separate throughout history. But the rise of the secular public space in much of western Europe means that religion has lost its public hold. In much of western Europe, in industrialized states, institutional religion has declined as a singular cohesive force, a force which traditionally gave meaning and stability to communities. Religion may still have its connective and collective attraction binding people together as Charles Taylor states but society is now one in which "faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one possibility among others."[14] Despite the decline of institutional religion, religious discourse in the public sphere has been reawakened.

Our conversations are often not so much about religion itself but about the possible reach of religion and how to protect the perceived secular space. Here religious faith often appears as a problem to be resolved through discussions on pluralism or diversity or a problem exacerbated by superficial and often stereotypical analysis of the unreasonable demands of religious people. Religions are frequently presented as monoliths, faith in God often stripped of meaning and fulfilment but seen rather as a perpetual, social and political source of angst. That religion is a central feature of human life, giving shape and meaning to our existence is often lost in the frequent media attention given to contesting whether religion is a force for good or bad in the modern world. Here, religious faith, especially theistic faith, is often seen as something which directs us to an intolerant past, whereas secularism and liberalism grounds us in individual freedom and orients us towards a hopeful future. Politics and religion are seen as separate spheres. The debate has a simple premise which is that a gradual secularisation of most of the western world has been realised through a conscious and enlightened distance between church and state, especially after the bloody religious wars of early modern Europe, leading eventually to healthy, liberal democracies. The separation of church and state is not however the same as the separation of religion and politics which led many like Mark Lilla to reflect on the continuing appeal of religion and its excesses:

[13] Michael Morgan, *Lost History*, National Geographic Society, Washington D.C. 2008, 289-290

> We are disturbed and confused. We find it incomprehensible that theological ideas still inflame the minds of men, stirring up messianic passions that leave societies in ruin. We assumed that this was no longer possible, that human beings had learned to separate religious questions from political ones, that fanaticism was dead. We were wrong.[15]

In recent years the new atheism debates accuse religion as a failed science. For the new atheists, all major religions are bad but Islam is seen by some as uniquely dangerous to civilisation or as Sam Harris says in *The End of Faith*, `Islam has makings of the cult of death.'. Their perspectives are made bold by statistics and surveys which show that many religious communities encourage fundamentalist theologies, readings of scripture which are often intolerant of other views, and thus promote a narrow ethics and a narrow vision of human coexistence and flourishing.

Public discourse on religions maintains a cautious approach to the power of theological language which in the age of the internet and globalisation can travel thousands of miles in seconds, so that what happens in the caves of Yemen, the neighbourhoods of Mosul, the trendy malls of Dubai, the streets of Cairo have consequences on the roads and boulevards of London, Paris and Berlin. Events can bring people together or tear communities apart. Nowhere has this been vocal in recent times than in the current focus on militant jihadism or Islamism, a vocabulary constructed to qualify sporadic yet sustained acts of violence, executed by Muslims who try to create new religious narratives through destroying that most fundamental of human virtues – empathy. Whenever a killing or plot has been identified as terrorism, social media reflects the societal divisions which threaten decades of coexistence from` love not hate' slogans to appeals to internment and sending back. Time and space collapse as the distance between cultures, languages and ideologies is bridged through the power of technology. This process of technological globalisation has immediate local impact in multicultural societies so that how we understand the world may be how we understand our neighbour.

For Ciara Bottici, this resurrection of the public role of religion has been the result of the reduction of politics and imagination:

> The current resurrection of religion in the public sphere is linked to a deep transformation of political imagination which has its roots in the double process of the

[15] Mark Lilla, The Stillborn God: Religion, Politics and the Modern West, Knopf: New York, 2003, 3.

> reduction of politics to mere administration, on the one hand, and to spectacle, on the other. In an epoch when politics is said to be simply a question of 'good governance', of good administration within a neo-liberal consensus, the paradox is that of a lack of political imagination which goes hand in hand with its hypertrophy through the media[16].

For many people, the individualization of religion, not as a transcendental experience but as value laden normative ethics, has become the most important phenomenon of religion today. Other than a few works, classical Islam did not have systematic treatises on ethics as the subject was subsumed under law and worship. The juridical literature also gives us some insight as to the dilemmas of whether Muslims could actively participate in non-Islamic societies but these premodern texts are not conclusive by any means. More importantly they do not contain within themselves the appropriate equivalents of words like liberalism, human rights, or democratic pluralism, the global vocabulary of the modern age. Fundamentalism has been added to the public and academic lexicon at a time when the global (dis)order with its cosmopolitanisms, relativisms, pluralisms and movement of people and ideas across the world has contributed to an excessive concern with identity, authenticity and ultimate values – the fundamentals of existence. These conditions precipitate a renewed quest of what it means to live and believe. One of the effects of globalisation is that it in most Muslim societies, globalisation has led to erosion of traditional methods of knowledge production and dissemination. Mass communication and literacy have led to diverse ways of democratizing knowledge even though the decentrality of knowledge has always been part of the Islamic world. Now discussion forums involve imams, muftis and various lay and trained scholars who all become part of the public voice of Islam, all vying for the same authority. They will all claim that they don't begin with politics, they begin with ontology.

On the one hand, the dialectic of Islam and modernity seems insurmountable, as it is so pervasive throughout Muslim majority states and the West, who in different ways, posit both as irreconcilable entities. However, a broader definition of modernity, could simply denote adaptation and change, which occurs at all times and in all places.[17] Thus there are multifarious,

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[16] Ciara Bottici,`The politics of imagination & the public role of religion', *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, vol 35:8, 985–1005, 985.

[17] M. Hoebink,) *Thinking about Renewal in Islam* Brill: Leiden, 1999, 29.

organic versions of modernity, rather than a linear progression made by one group. Islam is also a term which can be negotiated. It can be conceived broadly as an effort to instigate a 'moral community' which looks to an ethical ideal in the Qur'an, with a recognition that God ultimately knows best. The late Muhammad Arkoun wished to create broader, more inclusive definitions which reconcile the two.

For Arkoun, the 'West' as a singular entity proposes one way of running the market, science and politics. It is 'devoted to secular, rational, universalist ideals'. Islamic countries were forcibly inundated with these ideals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. This led many of the elites in these countries to consider the West as the central beacon of civilisation, whilst their own societies were backward and irrelevant on the world stage. Arkoun grapples with these complex issues, rejecting Muslim apologists on the ground that 'tyranny of faith' was as toxic as 'tyranny of reason.'

Arkoun argued that liberalism does not have to be cleaved from religion to be acceptable. Muslim scholars need to `initiate a process of new thinking on Islam with tools such as history of thought rather than political events or fixed parameters; to make unthinkable notions-a historical rather than a religious postulate-thinkable; and to relate secularism, religion, and culture to contemporary challenges rather than substituting one for the other.' Thinkers, writers, artists, scholars and economic producers must all be committed to injecting new dynamism, thoughts have their own life force and no dominating ideology can encapsulate the richness of Islam. In other words what is needed is the freedom to think the unthought. For Arkoun, Islam as revelation is only one attempt to emancipate human beings from the natural limitations of their biological, historical and linguistic condition. In his critique of the varying polemics recently directed against Orientalism, Arkoun argued that what intellectual Islam needs today is a new epistemological perspective for the comparative study of cultures. It needs a new dynamism and however limited the influence of intellectual writers might be in injecting new dynamism into Islamic thought where traditions have a long and deeply rooted history, this enterprise is necessary. Furthermore, it must be the project of thinkers, writers, artists and scholars and economic producers. They must all be committed to the idea that `thoughts have their own force and life. Some, at least, could survive and break through the wall of uncontrolled beliefs and dominating ideologies.'[18] The project of thinking Islam is basically a

[18]Mohammed Arkoun, `Rethinking Islam Today,' *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social*

response to two major needs: 1) the particular need of Muslim societies to think, for the first time, about their own problems which had been made unthinkable by the triumph of orthodox scholastic thought; and 2) the need of contemporary thought in general to open new fields and discover new horizons of knowledge, through a systematic cross cultural approach to the fundamental problems of human existence. Muslim thinking on so many issues has historically been confined to interpretations, albeit varying, from the classical sources. Yet modern social and political complexities require bold new ways of thinking about dramatically different frameworks of life. This demands new language and sensibilities about human coexistence. This approach does not advocate disregarding the traditional sources but it does entail reviving them in new ways which keep them meaningful to contemporary concerns in all areas of life. The discursive nature of religious piety must be kept alive so that religious faith does not turn into a fundamentalist ideology where there is only one official interpretation of text and one kind of clergy who posit `official' interpretations.

Sometimes however, place and politics come together to create an issue of global. significanceIn 2003, the historian Karl Schlogel's groundbreaking work, *Im Raume lesen Wir die Zeit*.was published . In it, he wrote `History is set not only in time but also in space,`[19] that history is not just a series of events in a linear order, it is not generalities or abstraction, it is specifics of people and places. Space and geography matter in how we give meaning to events. Perhaps nowhere has this become more relevant in recent years than in the current movement of people from east to west. Lives and landscapes have been transformed in days. The recent flow of refugees and migrants from the Middle East and North Africa into Europe has led to political and cultural soulsearching in the west, and reignited religious and civilisational debates along the binary of Islam and the west. How to end the conflicts of the Middle East and deal with the vast flow of refugees with compassion but realism, may be the most urgent ethical question bridgeing global politics and Islam today. There are no simple solutions to a problem which so far has been met with little political resolve but requires a profound ethical imagination.

Science, Vol. 588, Islam: Enduring Myths and Changing Realities, July, 2003, 18-39, here, 21-24.

19 Karl Schlögel, *Im Raume lessen Wir die Zeit*, Carl Hanser Verlag GmbH & Co. 2003, xvii.

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